

weapons. Therefore I asked Fidel Castro how he had thought Kennedy would react to the deployment.

"I was convinced," Castro replied, "that a very tense situation would be created, and that there would be a crisis." Then he offered me a rationale for the missile gamble that was pure Castro in terms of his calculated-risk instinct blended with his sense of principle—and which in the light of his own history is entirely believable. Contrary to common belief, Castro's gamble succeeded better than Khrushchev's: He won a noninvasion guarantee from the United States at no cost to himself, whereas the Soviets were simply humiliated by Kennedy. But it took Castro a few months to realize it in his fury at Khrushchev for making a missile-withdrawal deal with Kennedy behind his back. Being Fidel, he had wanted from the crisis more than just survival.

In the meantime, he said to me, "put yourself in our place—between a situation of impotence facing a very powerful country that could at any moment decide to invade Cuba, costing the lives of millions of Cubans who would have resisted, and a situation of running a risk from a more secure position, a risk of a world nature, but not a risk of conventional war." Castro's calculation was that, in effect, the threat of nuclear conflict would save him from a nonnuclear attack by the United States.

"We preferred the risks, whatever they were, of great tension, a great crisis," he said, "to the risks of the impotence of having to wait, impotently, for a United States invasion of Cuba. . . . At least they gave us a nuclear umbrella, and we felt much more satisfied with the response we were giving to the policy of hostility and aggression toward our country. From the moral point of view, I never had and I shall never have doubts that our attitude was correct. From a strictly moral as well as strictly legal viewpoint, as a sovereign country we had the right to make use of the type of arms we considered gave us a guarantee. And in the same way that the United States had missiles in Italy and Turkey, in the same way as the United States has bases in all parts of the world around the Soviet Union, we, as a sovereign nation, considered we had the absolutely legal right to make use of such measures in our own country."

Thus the only relevant issue was "political," Castro said, and the United States "acted according to political positions and formulas and according to force" to prevent the Soviet deployment. However, he volunteered the comment that at the time "the correlation of forces in the nuclear realm favored the United States," adding that it was a fact "I ignored" in 1962. Castro was thus saying that he had engaged in the missile confrontation without being adequately informed by the Soviets of the superpowers' relative nuclear strength. Too elegant diplomatically to spell it out, Castro was nevertheless giving me a very clear impression that Khrushchev had led

him astray with his missile proposals—leaving one to wonder what Fidel would have done had he known the truth. This was unprecedented insight into the secrets of Soviet-Cuban relations.

"At that time," Castro said, "I ignored how many nuclear weapons the Soviets had and how many nuclear weapons the North Americans had. I ignored it, and it did not occur to me to ask the Soviets about it; it did not seem to me I had the right to ask, 'Listen, how many missiles do you have, how many do the North Americans have, what is the correlation of forces?' We really trusted that they, for their part, were acting with the knowledge of the entire situation. We did not have all the information to be able to make a complete evaluation of the situation, we only had part of the information available." As it turned out, Castro never really forgave the Soviets for keeping him in the dark, or misleading him, about the world nuclear balance of forces when he put Cuba's life on the line on the basis of Khrushchev's assurances. So confident were the Cubans of the Soviets' good judgment that President Dorticós told the United Nations General Assembly in New York on October 8, when the missiles were already being clandestinely deployed, "We warn that if an error is committed, aggression against Cuba can become transformed, to our great regret and against our desires, into the start of a new world war."

Among other continuing controversies about the 1962 nuclear crisis is the question of how close the world really *did* come to war, atomic or, at least, conventional. The accepted wisdom is that war might have begun if Soviet ships bound for Cuba had not halted on October 24 without crossing the quarantine line drawn by Kennedy. Otherwise they would have been forcibly stopped by U.S. warships and planes—an act of war presumably followed by a Soviet response, and then unpredictable rounds of escalation. The danger still persisted until the morning of October 28, a Sunday, when the crisis was settled through the final Kennedy-Khrushchev exchange of letters. A nuclear duel was certainly possible during that week inasmuch as Soviet medium-range missiles in Cuba had become operational on October 23, and it had to be assumed that they were armed with nuclear warheads.

However, as Fidel Castro recounted the history of the crisis, Saturday, October 27, was a most critical day, not only because Soviet surface-to-air (SAM) batteries had shot down a high-flying Air Force U-2 reconnaissance plane that morning, but because the Cubans were trying to shoot down low-flying American aircraft. Castro insisted that contrary to published allegations, the Russians and not the Cubans had brought down the U-2 because they had the exclusive control of the SAMs, but he was just as vehement in saying that he was determined to destroy any American plane



his anti-aircraft artillery could reach—regardless of consequences. For him, it was again a matter of principle and sovereignty, and he had ordered that American aircraft that appeared over Cuba a few days after the crisis was settled be fired upon—even if it reopened the confrontation. Castro was aware when he spoke to me that Kennedy had resolved to bomb Cuba if a second American aircraft was shot down after the loss of the U-2.

"The [SAM] rockets were in the hands of the Soviets, and the anti-aircraft batteries—all the conventional ones—were in our hands," Castro recounted. "We had hundreds of batteries. In those days, this type of rocket could not fire below one thousand meters. It was effective above one thousand meters, but in those days of the crisis the North Americans began flights at a very low level, in addition to the U-2s. They began flights at two hundred or three hundred meters. I realized that the SAMs as well as intermediate-range [ground-to-ground] missiles were threatened with destruction simply by low-level attacks when the SAMs were absolutely impotent."

Castro continued: "Then I ordered the deployment of all the anti-aircraft batteries we had, some three hundred batteries. I submitted to the Soviets that we could not permit the low-level flights and we were going to use the batteries. We installed all these batteries around all the SAM bases and around all the missiles, and that day we issued the order to fire. It was we who gave the orders to fire against the low-level flights. This is rigorous historical reality."

On the morning of October 27, Castro said, "a couple of planes, or several couples of planes, appeared in low-level flight over different places, and our batteries began to fire." Official U.S. records confirm that on that morning two low-flying reconnaissance aircraft were fired upon, but not hit, around 10 A.M., when the U-2 was shot down by a SA-2 rocket. Castro said that "the inexperience of our artillerymen, who had recently learned to operate these pieces, probably made them miss as they fired on the low-flying aircraft." When the U-2 was crossing Cuba and flew over Oriente Province, Castro said, "a Soviet surface-to-air rocket battery fired on the plane and hit it."

Fidel told me, "It is still a mystery how it happened; we had no jurisdiction, no control over Soviet anti-aircraft batteries." He said: "We had simply presented our viewpoint to [the Soviets], our opposition to low-level flights, and we ordered our batteries to fire on them. We could not fire against the U-2. But a Russian there—and for me it is still mystery, I don't know whether the Soviet battery chief caught the spirit of our artillerymen and fired, too, or whether he received an order—did fire the rockets. This is a question that we do not know ourselves, and we didn't want to ask much about this problem."

I commented that the downing of the U-2 could have triggered a world war. Castro replied, "I don't know what would have happened if the U-2s had flown over again, but I am absolutely certain that if the low-level flights had been resumed, we would have shot down one, two, or three of these planes . . . with so many batteries firing, we would have shot down some planes. I don't know whether this would have started a nuclear war." He said the planes did not return the following day because the Soviet-American agreement was reached, but they did come back several days later in low-level flights.

Castro said that Soviet Deputy Premier Mikoyan was already in Havana "to explain all this to us, and we warned him that we did not accept low-level flights under any circumstances. We told the Soviets that although the accord was reached, we would fire against low-flying aircraft, and we gave orders to our batteries. But that day, a contact between the Soviets and the Americans may have occurred, and they suggested to them not to fly. That day I was at the San Antonio air force base, where we had some batteries, and that was where every day, at ten A.M., these planes were flying over. I went there, and I waited for the planes at ten A.M. I knew that there would be a counterstrike, and that possibly we would have many casualties, but I thought it was my duty to be there, in a place that surely would be attacked, but the planes did not come that day." Fidel sounded almost wistful. But he lived up to his concept of military honor: Four days after the U-2 was shot down by the Soviet battery, Castro ordered that the body of the pilot, Major Rudolph Anderson, be returned to the United States for dignified burial at home. Ironically, Major Anderson was one of the two U-2 pilots who, on October 14, had brought back the first photographs of the Soviet missile deployment in Cuba; the crisis was set in motion by these photographs.

Fidel Castro never concealed his "irritation," as he put it, with the Soviet Union for having struck a deal with the United States to repatriate the missiles without consulting him. The rancor was still there when he was telling me the crisis story twenty-two years later, remarking that "it had really never crossed my mind that the option of withdrawing the missiles was conceivable." Although Castro said that in the end he understood why Moscow had removed the missiles—because of the Soviet nuclear inferiority of which he had not been sufficiently aware—and that the Russians had been right, "we were irritated for a long time." He volunteered the remark, never before publicly uttered by him, that "this incident, in a certain way, damaged the existing relations between Cubans and Soviets for a number of years—many years elapsed." Despite displays of surface friendship and mutual high-level visits, these relations remained tense, difficult,

now in  
afternoon

Monday

What day  
U-2?

ONE U-2  
SHOT DOWN  
ON 10 NOV  
BY SA-2  
TOLD!

(Long)

no. 100

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from [unclear] 1958, on 10-27-58 (on 10-27-58)